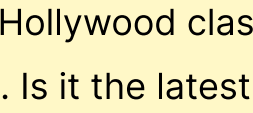




CENTRESTAGE / OPINION

Closet Politics of the Not-Gay Man

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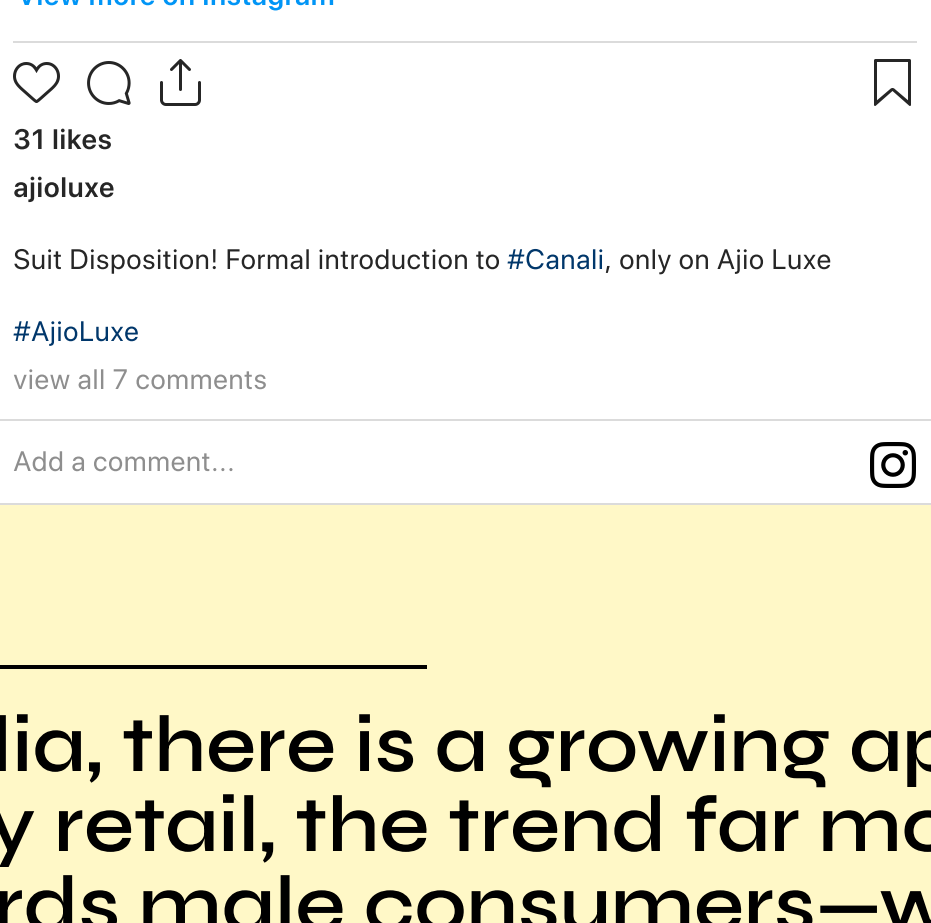
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Imagine the Raymond man of the past teleported to 2022. What does he find? The not-gay man ready to unleash his inner ‘camp’ and step out of rusty, old patriarchal taste

Nearly 70 years back, Marilyn Monroe sang her sensational ditty about diamonds being a girl's best friend in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953). Decades have passed since the Hollywood classic, but we are still not certain about what a boy's best friend is. Is it the latest model of Tesla? A Rolex watch? The finest scotch on the sundeck of a luxury yacht? Or maybe just a trusty canine companion, also known in grossly un-woke terms, as “man's best friend”?

These are some of the suggested answers you'll find on Quora, the crowdsourced online Q&A forum, to the question, “If diamonds are a girl's best friend, what a guy's best friend would be?” (Yes, someone was actually curious enough to post this query). But if you're looking for an empirically robust response, a sound source would be *Atlas of Affluence 2022*, the first white paper on luxury retail in India published by *The Voice of Fashion* team recently. It is based on consumer research—qualitative and quantitative—conducted in six cities by a professional agency with more than 950 respondents.

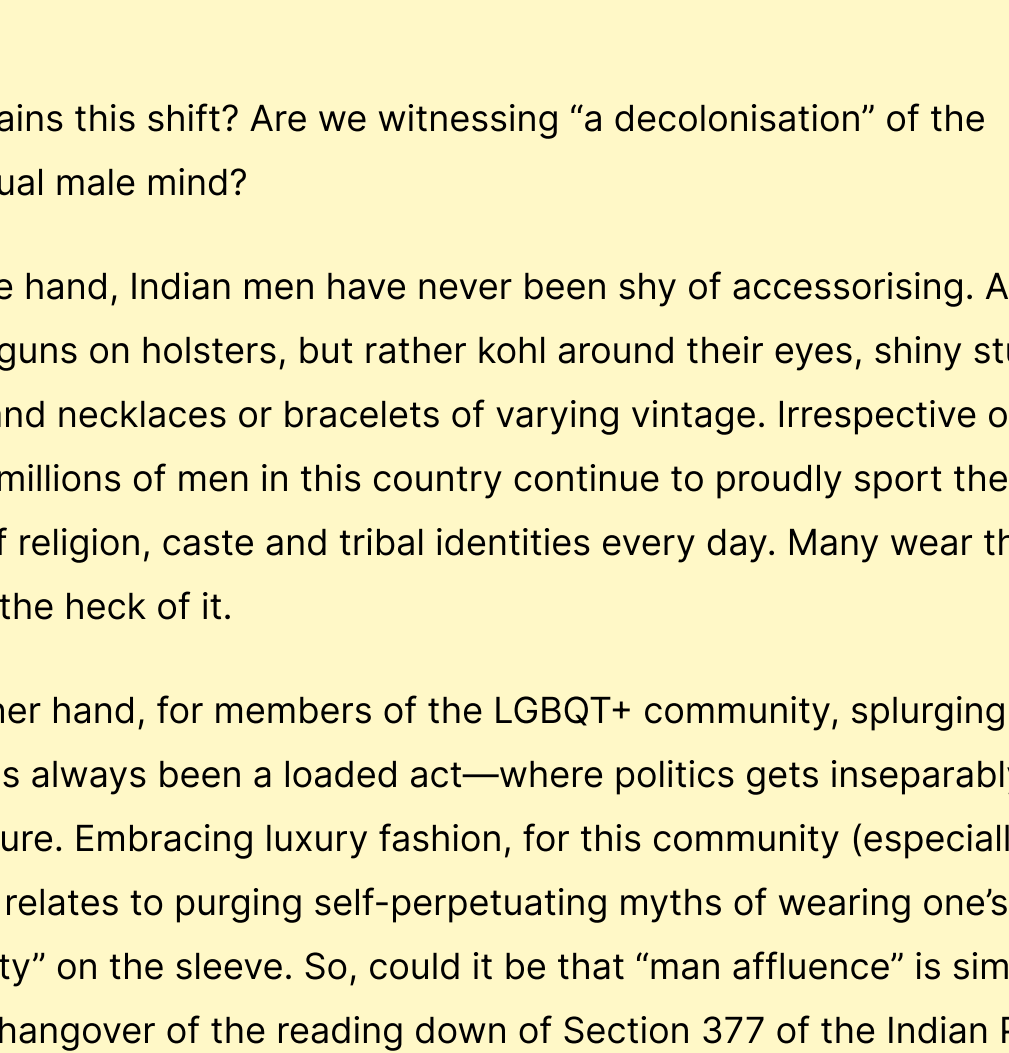
The salient findings of this deep dive into India's luxury retail market, tracking shifts in consumption patterns and habits since the onset of the pandemic is largely in sync with the global picture. In India, as in everywhere else, there is a growing appetite for luxury retail. But what's truly intriguing is the finding that this trend is far more skewed towards male consumers—with clothing being the leading category of their choice to splurge on.



In India, there is a growing appetite for luxury retail, the trend far more skewed towards male consumers—with clothing being the leading choice to splurge on.

Usually unadventurous, at best modestly daring, in their sartorial choices, Indian men in the past are known to have inspired a rather dim view among commentators. Historian Mukul Kesavan's 2008 book was called *The Ugliness of the Indian Male and Other Propositions*. That may be a somewhat unfair generalisation, but men leading the league of super-spenders when it comes to clothes sounds like a new oddity. As the executive summary of the *Atlas of Affluence* notes drolly, when it comes to high-end fashion retail, a strangely exciting era of “man affluence” is upon us.

It's a baffling trend, indeed, especially in a society that thrives on ubiquitous sexist jokes about women's extravagant tastes being the cause of ruin for many a good man. But one out of two Indian men, according to the survey, is now a victim of “man affluence”. They put clothes and couture as foremost among their prized luxury preferences (not the latest iPhone or sports car, mind you). As many as 60 per cent say they are driven by brands when it comes to making premium purchase decisions. Marquee fashion lines, historically dominated by LGBTQ+ designers, models, and buyers, are now seeing a surge of new takers among a cross-section of hetero-/metro-sexual men.



A menswear ensemble from Antar-Agni.

What explains this shift? Are we witnessing “a decolonisation” of the heterosexual male mind?

On the one hand, Indian men have never been shy of accessorising. And I do not mean guns on holsters, but rather kohl around their eyes, shiny studs on earlobes and necklaces or bracelets of varying vintage. Irrespective of their sexuality, millions of men in this country continue to proudly sport these markers of religion, caste and tribal identities every day. Many wear these purely for the heck of it.

On the other hand, for members of the LGBTQ+ community, splurging on fashion has always been a loaded act—where politics gets inseparably tangled with pleasure. Embracing luxury fashion, for this community (especially for elite gay men), relates to purging self-perpetuating myths of wearing one's “masculinity” on the sleeve. So, could it be that “man affluence” is simply an extended hangover of the reading down of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in India in 2018? As the wheels of laws turn, outdated norms of male luxury fashion also seem to release their brakes.

Release their brakes.

Cricketer KL Rahul in a platinum jewellery campaign. Image for representation.

Platinum Guild of India